

Early Developments at Kitsbury

THE TOWN'S GROWTH IN VICTORIAN TIMES

By 'BEORCHAM'

I HAVE the good fortune to possess a number of maps, ancient and modern, of local and county interest. One which fascinates me more than any other is an Ordnance Survey map of 1878. With a scale of 25½ inches to the mile, even the footpaths beside the roads are clearly indicated.

Every house, every privy at the bottom of the garden, is coloured red. Every greenhouse is shown in blue; even the glass canopies which formerly adorned Berkhamsted railway station, fore and aft, are given the blue treatment. Every factory, saw-mill and gasholder is shown in a workaday shade of grey. But the trees—thousands and thousands of them—are outlined in black. Perhaps it was winter when the map-makers called.

IN THE VALLEY

Every time I look at this handsome map I spot something I hadn't noticed before. Like other good works of reference, it is brimful of facts. What makes it especially valuable is its date; it appeared at a particularly interesting time, just when Berkhamsted had ceased to be a valley town. Very few residents homeward plodded their weary way uphill until late Victorian times.

As was stated in an earlier article, until the mid-19th century most of the inhabitants lived in High Street, Mill Street, Water Lane, and Castle Street. Then the town expanded eastward: the map of 1878 shows rows of houses in Chapel Street, Manor Street, Raven's Lane, Holliday Street, Provident Place, Bridge Street, Thompson's Row, Highfield Road and Victoria Road. Between the canal and the railway, there were a few cottages on the east side of Gravel Path, and George Street and Ellesmere Road were about half their present length. Station Road did not exist, though there were a few small cottages

beside the canal, near the Crystal Palace.

At the opposite end of the town, the map glows red with houses on the east side of Park Street, in little by-roads named River Terrace, Norris's Terrace and Eddy Street, and of course on both sides of the highway. Partly in Berkhamsted parish, partly in Northchurch parish, Gossoms End then had the appearance of a hamlet poised halfway between town and village.

ON THE HILLSIDE

The main lesson to be learnt from the 1878 map is that most of the inhabitants lived between High Street and the Bulbourne. Despite much rebuilding and in-filling, only one additional road has been built on this long, narrow strip of land between Bank Mill and Billet Lane—Lower King's Road (1885). This area is probably not much more densely populated today than it was ninety years ago, and as the oldest part of the town it contains most of the best and some of the worst of Berkhamsted's ageing buildings.

Nevertheless, in 1878 more people with High Street addresses lived on the south than on the north side of the highway. 'Ribbon development' started here many centuries ago. But very few people chose to live on our southern hillside: south of the highway the map shows almost as many fields as houses.

As previously mentioned, Highfield Road and Victoria Road were already in existence; there were a few cottages in Grubb's Lane (Chesham Road); Red Lion Yard was a populous slum behind what is now the Midland Bank; and in King's Road, above the Police Station, stood ten long-forgotten little cottages, as well as Hope Hall and two semi-detached houses (which still survive) on the opposite side of the road. But with

the exception of Unity Cottages, which formerly stood behind the Co-operative Society's premises, there were no buildings, other than those which faced the High Street, until one reached Kitsbury Road.

KICK'S END BURY

Here a number of new houses had been built on what was previously a track to Kitsbury Farm; the half-timbered farmhouse survived until the 1920s. A short distance away, builders had also been busy on the east side of the lower part of Gilham's Lane (Cross Oak Road). In addition, a few houses had been built in Charles Street, which in 1878 existed from Cross Oak Road to a short distance beyond what was then the top of Kitsbury Road; the rest of the way to King's Road was still little more than a footpath.

Thus we find an unexpected development; the conversion of our southern hillside west of King's Road into a built-up area did not start near the town centre but over a third of a mile to the west, opposite Park Street.

It was on 13th November, 1868, when Mr. G. Alexander Smith, at the King's Arms Inn, sold by auction the Kitts End Bury (Kitsbury) Estate. The prospectus referred to 'meadow, pasture arable land' and said that new streets would be 'laid out, formed and gravelled . . . The whole presents advantageous sites for erecting villa residences, business premises and private dwellings so much required in this locality.'

Sixty large and small plots of land were available. The smaller plots were on both sides of Kittsbury Road (note the spelling), and on the east side of Gilham's Lane. Higher up the hill, considerably larger plots of land were for sale.

THE BOXWELLS ESTATE

In 1879 the neighbouring Boxwells Estate, for many years owned by the Littleboy family, came in the market. The proposed new road (Boxwells Road, with an s) was advertised as being 'on the preferable side of the High Street.' The vendors stressed that the 'railway station is near at hand, from whence London may be reached in 51 minutes.'

Then, in 1887, Steel's Meadow and Doctors Commons Building Estate were sold. There were 108 plots 'having important frontages to four newly-formed streets, called Cowper Street,

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Torrington Street, Charles Street and Montague Road . . . The site commands near and lovely views of the extensive domain of the ancient Castle, which, with the verdant slopes that encircle the town, and the evergreen plantations that wave on every hill, complete a landscape of unrivalled beauty.' What's more, the Metropolis was reached by train in only 45 minutes. Progress!

It was expected that 24 houses would be built in Torrington 'Street'; despite modern additions that number has yet to be exceeded.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS

In 1888, 15 plots of land were offered for sale on the east side of King's Road. A continuous line of villas was planned from a row of old cottages (pulled down in the 1890s) to Butts Meadow, and originally no provision was made for Clarence Road.

Thus the land between High Street and Charles Street, from Cross Oak Road to King's Road, became a built-up area. It was time to start devouring the hillside above Charles Street, and in 1888 the first portion of the vast Kingshill Estate came in the market. Seventeen plots of land, three facing Charles Street and the others between King's Road and Doctors Commons Road, were offered for sale.

Another part of the Kingshill Estate, including what is now Doctors Commons Road, was sold in 1897; four years later 50 plots of land in another new road, North Road, were sold by auction; and in 1902 a start was made on Shrublands Avenue and a further part of Cross Oak Road. It is interesting to note that Crossways, built shortly before the second World War, was planned as early as 1902.

(To be continued)